

Quiet leaders want change, not limelight

People define quiet leaders by what they're not. They're not making big-deal decisions. They're not at the top of the food chain. They don't take the spotlight. They view themselves modestly and, often, not as leaders.

They quietly make things better. Sometimes, much better.

But here's what makes them bona fide leaders: When some problem or inadequacy persists, they commit themselves to the issue and work at it doggedly until they fix it.

Rosa Parks, for example, avoided making a scene over being ordered to sit in the back of her local bus. When a particular bus driver demeaned her, she stopped riding his bus. But she also attended civil-rights training programs. She wasn't looking for a leadership role, but she prepared for it. She simply decided that enough was enough.

Albert Schweitzer, another quiet leader, could have been a prosperous musician or theologian. But he chose to serve lepers and other sick people in Africa. He did win a Nobel Prize after decades of work, but he put the money into his hospital and continued laboring quietly until he died at age 90.

Schweitzer compared high-profile leaders to sea foam on top of an ocean. But he may have best described quiet leaders, whom he said "must be content with small and obscure deeds. The sum of these, however, is a thousand times stronger than the acts of those who receive wide public recognition."

Lesson: You don't have to be a ham or a drama queen to lead. You just need to lead.

—Adapted from "The Quiet Leader—And How to Be One," Martha Lagace, HBS Working Knowledge, <http://hbswk.hbs.edu>.